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ABSTRACT

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Reading and 'Languaging in the Content Areas' - A Third Generational Approach*

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It has been wisely noted that the writer doesn't write what he already knows. Writers write to discover what they are thinking. "Before they start, they may have hints and fragments of ideas, but their drafts are a plunge into the unknown, an exploration." (Burton, 1974, p. 565)

This article plunges into a third generational effort to delineate a theory of post-elementary school "reading". The lack of a thesis unifying such terms as "secondary school reading", "content reading", "communication skills", and "comprehension/study skills" have caused the literature to appear disjointed, with the result of inhibiting wider acceptance of reading programming at post-elementary school levels. This paper attempts to provide an historical context for defining post-elementary school "reading", offers a working title for a potentially unifying thesis, and briefly describes the major instructional objectives, operations, and implications issuing from the formulating thesis. The term 'Languaging in the Content Areas' (LICA) is proposed as a working title for this thesis.

Historical Context: The Evolution to 'Languaging'

For a time secondary school reading had been defined in terms of word recognition, vocabulary, rate, comprehension and study skills. More recently the term "content area reading" has been added, drawing attention to a belief

(*working title for a book length manuscript in preparation)

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that each subject has its own peculiar set of reading-study skills requirements and that these are best taught by the content area teacher. The LICA thesis adds the feature of "languaging" - an active verb for language. We have been introduced to the term "languaging" from Postman and Weingartner (1969), but are sure that this is not its origin. The languaging feature is added to stress the importance of teaching students how to examine and codify (label and process) the world about them into sets of symbols which can be readily manipulated to form ideas - ideas which then may be tested for validity by a system of analysis here called "dialectical" thinking.

Two key features of "languaging" distinguish it from the Language Arts. One is the proposition that teaching language involves imparting a particular view of the world which is nested in the words selected. To realize this is to understand why language behavior is so resistant to change; changing language often is tantamount to altering perceptions. Those who would cower at the prospect of altering language and perceptions should familarize themselves with the work of Murphy (1955) and Sherk (1974), wherein they demonstrate the dramatic differences in the classes of words found in comparisons of the language protocals of inner-city and other urban children responding to identical picture stimuli. Without the benefit of argument or decision, situations and class differences arbitrarily act to narrow language and perceptions, and therefore, the feelings and thoughts, of disenfranchized youngsters.

Just as language influences perceptions, the use of language in thinking determines the quality of thought. To that degree "dialectical" thinking is the system which we believe can improve the quality of thought, advance motivation to acquire a more formidable and precise language, as well as increase concern for more exact and comprehensive information; all building blocks for improved reading comprehension.

Dialectical thinking is so much a key feature of the LICA thesis, as we now fathom it, that it warrants this additional explanation.

The word "dialectical" is a philosophic term meaning debate, or conversation marked by dynamic tension. The term is most often used in logic, a branch of philosophy dealing with vertification of "knowledge". The term dialectical describes a way of thinking characterized by a reciprocal interaction of information, precepts, and ideas struggling to be reconciled into clear patterns of thought. The tension between the ideas striving to be inter-connected, or reconciled, is at the core of all sound learning situations. The purpose of education is to optimize these situations so that students can internalize this intellectual tension and carry on a continuous dialectical within themselves, learning to explore, to be challenged by discrepancies, and yet to feel relatively fulfilled in the face of persisting ambiguities. Thus, the critical objective of the LICA thesis is not merely to teach students how to critically read that which has been written, but to critically examine all that is around them so that they may develop a data base of their own from which to extend knowledge. The belief is that the best way to teach critical reading/thinking is to involve students in a creative process which only incidentally includes criticism. The emphasis on building beyond the current limits of knowledge contributes to the sense that we are trying to stand on the shoulders of those who came before us so that we may see further. Critical thinking issuing from this kind of mind set is bound to be more positive (and generative) than the type most often seen which often seems tinged with latent cynicism.

The term 'languaging' in LICA, then, is the result of the collision of at least three major notions: language learning, dialectical thinking and the creative process. It is not completely synonomous with language - with which it is most likely to be confused, nor with dialectical thinking - which is its seminal feature,

nor exclusive to the creative process - which is best understood as its primary hue and purpose, but all of these, simultaneously. In addition to these three central notions, the LICA design recognizes several critical ancillary factors with which it shares objectives and operations. Chief among these is the "valuing" process, (Raths, Simon, Harmon, 1971), inquiry training (Manzo and Legenza, 1975), content mastery, and a growing humanistic theme often referred to as "self-discovery"; i.e., an educator's approach to helping students better understand themselves and remain emotionally solvent while living and learning (Sherk and Manzo, 1974).

LICA Objectives Extend Traditional Objectives

In simplest terms the primary objective of the LICA thesis is to produce youngsters who can not only read and say what has been previously learned and written, but to read creatively, sifting through their own experiences so that they may come to be able to say that which has not been written. It is for the fact of going beyond where we are that lesson activities would stress valuing, dialectical thinking, inquiry, self-discovery, and the 'languaging' of experiences. These functions are not viewed as replacing more traditional objectives such as accurate comprehension, critical analysis and study skills. On the contrary, traditional objectives are heightened in importance. Traditional objectives are the essential basis for creative production. In pragmatic terms. The critical difference in approach is to have students become more consciously aware of those root questions about life, environment and the human condition which first stimulated people to evolve present fields of study. Recognizing the root sources around which masses of information have evolved has several potential advantages. It can serve to humanize a field of study which otherwise might appear too abstract, and/or irrelevant. It provides a frame of reference, in the form of a question, for which a mass of information and related questions are frequently offered as answers. It invites thinking beyond the current

limits of knowledge by making apparent the limits of current knowledge. It sharpens curiosity by illustrating the motivational sources for a given line of investigation. It reinforces manifestations of curiosity by showing how larger questions are organized into manageable parts. It helps to keep all things in better perspective. Over all, it demonstrates that all studies are essentially humanistic studies. This suggests that each of us is a participant in every question and every answer, and therefore, entitled, and obliged, to raise new questions and contribute to their resolve. To realize this is to prize the accumulated wisdom stored in books and personified in parents and teachers; who together, are the precipitates of the millenia of evolutionary process.

Guiding Precepts

The LICA thesis embraces instruction, learning, school-wide programming and certain social and community concerns as well. A careful perusal of the scope and nature of the activities composing this confluence suggest several re-occuring themes, or guiding precepts. Ten of the most fundamentals are stated here for the reader's consideration.

1) In order for experiences to be deeply learned and transferable to other contexts they must be worked through in language.

2) Most students fail to learn, not because they are being offered too much information, but because they are not being provided with enough.

3) Effective learning, the moving of minds, requires intensive, energy consuming, effort from both teacher and students.

4) Curiosity may be innate, but 'manifest curiosity' must be acquired - i.e., the inclination and ability to express curiosity.

5) The most important role a teacher can play is that of competent model of language, thinking and inquiry behaviors.

6) The search for understanding of self, and of individual potentialities is a rudimentary source of motivation, and can serve as such in academic studies.

7) Instruction must be arranged so as to permit greater recipiocity - i.e., interaction between students and teacher, and students and students, so that they may effectively influence one another in assertive versus aggressive or passive-aggressive (and apathetic) ways.

8) Classroom learning occurs in a social context influenced by social-psychological dynamics, these need to be more carefully heeded if lessons are to be successful.

9) The reading teacher should stress the acquisition of factual information from reading selections, just as the content teacher should stress the reading and language requirements of the content field.

10) Only a total, school-wide, concentration on "reading" (which in Robert McCracken's terms is "Only The Tiger's Tail") and its associated abilities, attitudes and operations can genuinely be expected to have positive outcomes on skills and learning.

Operations

An effective thesis is the means to a balanced, social-educational ecology. It suggests the kind and degree of adjustments necessary to achieve a benefit, the confluence of which, is greater than the mere sum of the parts. Frequently, the things to be adjusted are slight, other times they are massive. A few examples of the kinds of pragmatic practices which are part of the LICA effort serve to demonstrate this point, and provide a concrete point of reference for the class of instructional practices which we believe to be compatible with this formulating perspective.

. 'Experience with Languaging Activities' (ELA's)

Containing many examples of both big and small levels of adjustment are the ELA's, the most fundamental class of instructional activities spawned from the LICA

design. The core feature of this strategy is best expressed in these key questions which should ideally guide an Experience with Languaging Activity: What have you experienced/read/heard? What do you feel/think about it? What have you learned? What more might be learned? What more do you need to know to learn (or understand) more? What more needs to be learned so that we (man) can learn (understand) more?

Not all of these questions need be explicitly stated to have an ELA, but there is a definite, though not easily definable point, below which the activity lapses from a languaging into a traditional language arts/reading activity.

The most exemplary ELA is the ReQuest Procedure (Manzo, 1969). It qualifies on the basis that the procedure is designed to teach a student how to inquire, set his own purpose(s) for reading, and finally, read effectively. This is achieved via a reciprocal language exchange conducted between the teacher and students. In this instructional design, the teacher is available to the student as a model of language, inquiry and thinking behavior. This procedure is quite intense, and judged a superior means for moving minds and correcting cognitive deficits.

The power of a thesis to guide instructional choices is especially evident in the realm of vocabulary acquisition. In the Directed Reading Activity (Betts, 1950), as in many strategies, there is the charge to isolate and teach important vocabulary contained in a reading passage. A first generation approach to such teaching might have been to tell the students the meanings for the terms. A second generation effort would have involved some form of discussion to arrive at the best meaning(s) from context clues and dictionary definitions. A third generational effort might include a simulation, dramatization, or structured discussion designed to have the student experience some meaning for which the word would serve as a label.

In our impression, the best of the third generation, or ELA approaches, is the structured discussions. They require the least preparation and seem to have the greatest potential for fostering independent learning skills. One such strategy demonstrates this point, it involves helping students to find in themselves the experience or association which can serve as the point-of-reference for the new term. The procedure unfolds in this way. The word is arboreal. It is found in a seventh grade science text. The teacher tells the meaning. The meaning is, "having to do with trees or living in trees". A few examples are given. "Monkies are arboreal animals; the word arboreal, comes from the word arbor, as in Arbor Day, the day we are supposed to plant trees." The ELA aspect of the lesson begins at this point. "What experiences, thoughts or associations do you have with the term arboreal which might help you to learn and remember its meaning?" If there is no response, the teacher might suggest one which is peculiar to his experiences. More than likely, however, class members will have several to suggest. One student said of this very term, "the word reminds me of how my mother killed my peanut tree by over-watering it." The teacher directs the student speaking to record the word arboreal and its dictionary meaning in his notebook, adding to it a parenthetical note about his personal experience with the meaning of the word; the word now has an objective and subjective definition. The class is encouraged to record any such experience or association which is peculiar to their individual experiences in the same way. They may wish to record the association they heard about, it is now part of their experience, and therefore, a proper point of reference. But it is they, individually, who must decide what experiences, images or thoughts work best for their unique conceptual-associational requirements.

In this way, past experiences are re-discovered, re-labelled, and re-learned. The 'structured discussion' form of ELA virtually becomes a new, broadening experience.

Both the "mediational" (thinking) value and communications value of language have been enriched.

Important aspects of languaging can also be woven into even the most mundane of reading activities to produce an explosive effect. Take, for example, a typical "self-instructional" kit containing cards with graded exercises for improving reading comprehension. Students read short statements on the cards and complete the last line(s) from four available choices. Each student then corrects his own work by checking his choices with those in an answer booklet.

Activities of this type are frequently heralded as "self-pacing", "self-directive" activities. The teacher who does not believe this, (and fortunately there are many), attempts to help. She says to the student, "Why did you choose c for number two?" Immediately, the student knows c is incorrect, and that a quick guess at another of the three remaining choices may quickly relieve the social uneasiness accompanying the teacher's question - which revealed to all present that an error was undoubtedly made. The teacher-student interaction can be raised to a LICA informed level by this simple difference in approach. The same question is asked, but of a correct answer. Once the student gets over the initial shock of having too quickly changed to an incorrect response, the teacher can settle down with him and help him to review his first choice and to discover and reinforce the effective (if in fact it was effective) pattern of deliberations which led him to the correct choice.

In the first case the student comes to view the teacher as a wandering critic, in the second, as a resource person, helping him to language thru his own experiences and thoughts so that his most effective pattern might be strengthened. In this context, too, the student is much more likely to be willing to accept the criticisms implicit in those situations where he has made an incorrect choice.

Further, the social context is adjusted so that a conversation with the teacher is not tantamount to a public exposure of ignorance.

Major Modifications

Just as the LICA thesis suggests minor modications of potentially major consequences, it also suggests the need for some modifications of enormous proportions. One such modification, which may be viewed from many different perspectives, can be summarized in this way: to put a teacher in every textbook who is willing and able to provide assistance as the need arises. This, we believe, can be achieved thru a redesign of textbooks such that they would contain 'Imbedded Aids' (Manzo, 1974) to readers. While research is still underway on these, current prototypes and early data suggest that 'Imbedded Aids' are feasible and practicable. A tandum article, in preparation, will more fully describe these.

Other modifications of major proportions include a restructuring of the library such that it may serve more explicit educational purposes. This concept, called a 'Living Library' has been detailed elsewhere. (See Re: Reading and the Library, Manzo, A., Sherk, J., Mocker, D., Leibert, R., University of Missouri - Kansas City Improvement of Learning Monograph #1, 1972; and Manzo, A.V., "Conpass English: A Demonstration Project", Journal of Reading, April, 1973).

There are several other large scale modifications in school programming suggested by the LICA design. Expression of these reach into the length of the school day, alterations in curricula, and reorganization of school administration. Additional details on these are in preparation.

Implications

Recent developments in reading and related educational technology suggest that we are on the verge of some new vistas which will require redefinitions of current roles. We expect that within a half-generation, the reading specialist will assume

much more comprehensive responsibilities in school programming. In fact, these changes are even now occurring, though in no uniform way. The emerging new role may better be understood as an "Improvement of Learning" specialty. Advancement toward or away from this role is bound to our willingness to venture out beyond current boundaries, and to both find and generate the knowledge base necessary to make such change possible. We project that we will accept this challenge and meet it in short order. We reach this conclusion from a look over our shoulders. Reading specialists and reading researchers have been more active in the last twenty-five years than the combination of all other subdivisions of education. Further, if we continue to resist becoming over-institutionalized and over-departmentalized, there is every reason to believe that our future efforts will gain momentum and exceed the magnitude of our past and present.

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